

“The Full This-Worldliness of Life”

WESLEY HILL

When the theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned from England in 1935 to his native Germany, to the town of Zingst on the southern side of the Baltic, he took up the role of spiritual disciplinarian with gusto. He had spent the last several months visiting various pacifist communities and monastic enclaves in Britain, endeavoring to glean as many insights as possible from Anglican and Free Church experiments in Christian discipleship. He observed Benedictine Anglo-Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, and Quakers. He grew more enthralled by the discipline of praying the Psalter as he saw it done among these groups. He became fascinated by how self-denial in the form of the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience thrived alongside games of ping-pong and cigarette breaks. One gains the impression, reading Charles Marsh's new biography *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*—by turns elegant, harrowing, awe-inspiring, and sermonic—that Bonhoeffer was already aware in those days of the potential dissonance between a spirituality of rigor and a recognition of human buoyancy and *joie de vivre*, a dissonance that would make itself heard and felt in less than a year when he arrived back in Germany to found his own iteration of such an alternative community.

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It would be facile to say that Bonhoeffer was “conflicted,” but in retrospect it is possible to discern a fissure in his theology and life, in those years on the eve of European cultural collapse and war, that would only be consciously bridged later, in his final theological writings. On the one hand, in spearheading the newly formed Emergency Training Seminary of the Confessing Church, the famous school founded at Zingst and later moved to the Polish town of Finkenwalde that aimed to be a site of resistance to the Nazification of the German Evangelical (Lutheran) Church, Bonhoeffer embraced the Benedictine ethos wholeheartedly. He drew from the stockpile of Catholic devotions when he came to try to inculcate his own form of the *imitatio Christi*, adopting the posture of an abbot.

His famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*—rendered more accurately, though not entirely literally, in a recent translation as simply *Discipleship*—was a call to interpret the Lutheran *sola fide* (a shorthand term for “justification by divine grace, received and acknowledged by faith alone, apart from works”) as necessitating ethical action. Or perhaps that’s putting it too pacifically; Marsh describes the book as “a polemic against the Lutheran tendency to portray faith as a refuge from obedience.” It was a collection of “exercises actualizing the Sermon on the Mount” for dark times. Bonhoeffer was calling his students not only to denounce Nazi ideology but to steel themselves for prophetic actions of opposition to Hitler’s regime to which they would all, eventually, be driven.

This vision was fleshed out in lectures on the Gospel of Matthew’s Sermon, but it also, as Bonhoeffer’s students recalled, led to a particularly stringent form of communal life outside the classroom. Each member of the seminary felt “the weight of the world, the entire crisis of the Christian community.” There were enforced hours of silence and an expectation that all would join in manual labor. A daily office of morning and evening prayer, including personal meditation, punctuated by monthly Communion, bookended the community’s days. Bonhoeffer would have carried the regimen right through mealtimes, reading chapters of the Bible aloud while students ate, but the howls of protest caused him to relent from adding that extra burden, at least. Keeping time with the liturgical hours and abiding by the ascetic regimens was, Bonhoeffer felt, the way to fortify oneself for the sacrifices that the age would exact.

But it was during these same years that Bonhoeffer broke faith with some of monasticism’s ideals. One of the seminary’s first students, a member of the initial class of 23, was Eberhard Bethge, whom Marsh describes as “a slender, gentle young man.” Bethge had been expelled from ministerial training in Wittenberg for his anti-Nazi sentiments and had found his way to Finkenwalde to

Strange Glory

A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

CHARLES MARSH • KNOPF, 2014 • 515 PP. • \$35

Awareness: Raised

Trafficking into forced labor.

D. L. MAYFIELD

For many, including myself, “trafficking” is synonymous with sexual exploitation and modern-day slavery. Denise Brennan, writing specifically about trafficking into forced labor (which thrives in the garment and agriculture industries in America), is striving to change that perception. Her book *Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States* details the mounting reasons why individuals find themselves in situations where they are forced to work with little to no pay, in dismal conditions, without knowledge of their rights. As I ticked through the usual feelings that come when faced with horror in my own proverbial backyard—surprise, righteous anger, slow-ebbing guilt—I wondered why this was perhaps the first time I had thought long and hard about labor trafficking in the United States. Brennan herself would categorize my ignorance as a byproduct of a larger trend in public consumption: “women working in brothels fit the public imagery of trafficked victims—men picking fruits and vegetables simply [do] not spur the same call-to-arms.”

Brennan, an anthropologist who writes about trafficking, immigration reform, and women’s law, understands the cultural cachet that certain narratives enjoy. *Life*

Interrupted was written to pick up “where the sensationalist accounts leave off.” Indeed, Brennan seems determined to write the book that no one else would care to; instead of focusing on the hellish conditions surrounding a person’s journey into trafficked labor, Brennan focuses on the mundane challenges that victims face after they have walked away from their abusers. She tells stories about “building a life” after life has dealt a very cruel hand, and she’s intent on introducing the reader to “real people, not mythologized versions of ‘trafficked people.’”

The very real people portrayed in *Life Interrupted* do shine brightly; their stories make it personal for us, the readers. We’re reminded that these individuals are certainly not forgotten in the eyes of God, as much as we might long to stay unaware of them. In the course of compiling the interviews, Brennan strategically allowed the individuals to talk about whatever was interesting to them. As a researcher working with trafficking victims, she is all too aware of the danger of re-traumatizing people—and the slippery allure of turning people into lurid tropes. In the vein of authors such as Robert Coles and James Agee, Brennan stresses over and over again that there is no one



narrative that encapsulates the complex circumstances that enable a person to be forced into slave labor in the U.S., and that there is no one way to categorize these precious, beautiful women and men, made in God’s own image, who undergird the most hidden parts of our economy. In that sense she is writing as an artist, not a researcher; from a theological position, not an academic one.

While the bulk of the book focuses on the individuals and their personal stories of success and failure at making a life in the United States post-trafficking, Brennan does set the tone with a lengthy introduction. Her other purpose in the book, besides filling out whatever stereotypes of “trafficking” we might have in our mind, is to call

Life Interrupted

Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States

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begin his studies anew. Bonhoeffer was Bethge's senior by three years, not to mention his instructor, but the two men soon became emotionally attached and inseparable. From their initial meeting over white wine on the lawn to their sessions in the seminary music room, where Bonhoeffer passed on his love of Brahms and Chopin to Bethge, Marsh portrays Bonhoeffer as "smitten" by the younger student and, thereby, forced to qualify his acceptance of the communal rules he'd tried to import from England. A historic stricture in monasteries is the rule against "particular friendships." Pairs of friends, it is thought, can too easily break away from the community and lag in their commitment to the collective if they become too attached to one another. Then, too, there is the matter of sexual attraction, which can be fanned into flame in groups of two but better held in check through full immersion in the wider community. Whatever Bonhoeffer may have thought of this rule, he didn't observe it. He and Bethge continued to grow closer, though they were not, as far as we can tell, sexually intimate (Bonhoeffer apparently died a virgin).

This tension during Bonhoeffer's years at Finkenwalde—between the rigorous and politically engaged discipline of the resistance seminary's communal life and the tender affection of friendship with Bethge—is, in many ways, a microcosm of the larger story Marsh tells in this splendid biography. Marsh's book is a full life of his subject (originally he had planned to write only on Bonhoeffer's stay in America earlier in the 1930s, but that limited aim was abandoned for a bigger canvas), and one way of tracing its development is to read it as a narrative of an emerging humanistic,

STRANGE
GLORY

A LIFE OF
DIETRICH
BONHOEFFER

CHARLES
MARSH

world-affirming Christian spirituality. Having tried to observe a certain kind of Christian discipline in the shadow of one of the twentieth century's most horrific regimes, he later left it behind for "a faith more open, munificent, and sensuous."

The seeds of that later spirituality were sown in Bonhoeffer's childhood and adolescence. Marsh describes the young Bonhoeffer as well bred, at ease in the worlds of fashion, art, travel (he swooned over Italy), and especially music. His university years were shaped by his experience of studying with the most accomplished scholars of religion in the 20th century, Adolf von Harnack chief among them, and his dissertation, generally of higher quality and displaying more independent research) received the highest marks and met with wide acclaim. When he served as a pastoral assistant for a year at a church in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer's sermons engaged many young listeners in a way their permanent pastor never had, while his athletic prowess impressed them outside the confines of the sanctuary. On hot summer nights he would stay up late, drinking wine and attending the cinema. Marsh renders his subject as urbane and popular, writing home to request new clothes and expensive shoes. He was not, apparently, free from the vices of arrogance and flippancy that so often accompany the kind of privileged upbringing he had enjoyed.

But in time Bonhoeffer became increasingly conscious of the sense of obligation brought on by that privilege. As war came to seem increasingly unavoidable and the church, puppy-like, trailed Hitler obediently at

each fork in the road (one of the great achievements of Marsh's biography is to depict, in sickening detail and with fresh attention to subtlety and nuance, the degree of the church's complicity in Hitler's consolidation of dictatorial power), Bonhoeffer came to see his own road narrowing to a point of decision. After his time as a visiting fellow at Union Seminary in New York, his most enduring memory of the U.S. was of the African American church, Abyssinian-Baptist, he frequented in Harlem. There he had glimpsed the grounding of the struggle for social justice in passionate preaching and enacted communal solidarity, and he knew he had to find some similar way of life for himself. When Bonhoeffer couldn't resist heeding the alarm bells sounding in his native Germany, he returned home, in Marsh's fine phrase, "a theologian of the concrete."

What Marsh shows, in a thread that unifies his biography from its opening chapter until its close, is how this aim—to be a socially engaged, grounded, expressive theologian—was concretized for Bonhoeffer not simply in his prophetic speeches (he regularly and publicly denounced the church's capitulation and, equally, the Nazi government that demanded it) and not only in the contemplative asceticism of the Finkenwalde cloister but, gradually and with more and more self-awareness, in the "rich and multilayered worldliness" he had tasted in his earliest years. Marsh demonstrates, in other words, how the separate, parallel lines of Bonhoeffer's role as monastic abbot and advocate of prophetic, progressive political action and his role as friend to Bethge and music-loving bon vivant did eventually merge. Marsh takes those two unconnected lines and uses them to form a circle, picking up the unfinished line from Bonhoeffer's childhood, tracing it through the disquieting,

attention to the relationship between anti-immigrant policies and the pervasive exploitation of migrant workers in the United States. Indeed, she writes that "widespread migrant labor abuse—including trafficking—is the result of a robust demand for low-wage workers, the absence of federal immigration reform, ineffective labor laws, and migrants' fear of detection, detention, and deportation."

The stories of the (mostly) women that make up the majority of the book are compelling, worth reading on their own merit. But they are not the stories we are trained to want; they are not simple, easy; they do not talk about the abusers, they do not give us anyone to demonize. The individuals Brennan interviews, focusing mostly on their current struggles and future hopes, are simply people trying to survive in America. Many of them are isolated, without family and friends for support. They are alone. And most of all, they are poor.

I work on one of the many front lines of poverty in America—specifically, with non- and pre-literate refugees in a large midwestern city. I am familiar with many of the struggles recounted in *Life Interrupted*, the grinding effort to create a life out of nothing—years of no pay, years of psychological abuse, the anxiety of waiting to discover if you will be granted a visa to work and live in the U.S. As Brennan writes,

Poverty—and the injustices it is rooted in—delays formerly trafficked persons' dreams, compromises their economic future, and has long-lasting health effects. The conditions of living in unsafe neighborhoods, working in low-wage and often physically demanding jobs, and not having access to decent health care thwart many formerly trafficked persons' long-term plans.

I found myself nodding along as I read these accounts of life-making and repair work; I know many people who struggle to find decent wages, healthcare, and a community to support them. But I also found myself somewhat

dismayed at the focus. How was I supposed to care about these "victims" if they only told me about their present?

Life Interrupted gives me relatively little of the horror, the inhumanity, what Robert Coles refers to as "the brutality that civilized people somehow manage to allow in their midst." Brennan alludes to it, here and there—talking to a grower in North Carolina, for instance, who said: "the North won the War on paper but we confederates actually won because we kept our slaves. First we had sharecroppers, then tenant farmers, and now we have Mexicans." But for the most part, she prefers to give the reader the autonomy and obligation to understand the situation better than many of us do, refusing to lay it out neatly. In the end, she prefers the people who have lived through trafficking in the U.S. to come out on the other side and speak to us simply as the neighbors they are.

Therein lies the problem: I have been conditioned to crave the lurid, evocative stories. The raids on brothels, the drug mules. I prefer to focus on extreme situations which evoke horror and surprise, sins that seem to shimmer with exotic contrast to my everyday life. To honestly confront these surprisingly mundane stories of "formerly trafficked people" (a label which, in its exquisitely well-meaning sensitivity, can itself easily help me to distance myself from the individuals it names), I must look closely at myself and my daily habits: ignoring the friendless, not being in relationship with anyone who is barely making ends meet, always trusting someone else will provide. I live in a culture where there are endless evangelical abolitionist organizations, freedom fighters, one more fundraiser t-shirt to buy; you can even get an academic degree in rescuing people out of sexual exploitation. But I don't know any formerly trafficked persons on an individual level, although I have benefited from the systems that make up their broken realities.

A clear-eyed portrayal of how we like to talk about poverty and injustice will always sting a little. As Brennan notes about the leading "anti-trafficking" organizations (often focused exclusively on sex workers), "Basic, pragmatic concerns are neglected while other dimensions of . . . 'victimhood' are emphasized in the media or in programs offered by moralistic charities." She cites car ownership as one example—many formerly trafficked

persons (and indeed, many people in poverty in America) "frequently mention the need for financial aid to attend driving school, as well as resources to purchase a car and insurance." Brennan goes on to describe what I know to be true of my own neighborhood, which is that there are "no fundraising campaigns, media accounts, or government programs designed to help formerly trafficked persons drive." For Brennan, the gap between the numerous anti-sex trafficking organizations and the needs of the mostly invisible men and women who have come out of trafficking in the U.S. stems from an unwillingness to address the fundamental issue involved: poverty.

This isn't the book I wanted to read. I wasn't prepared to struggle through the issues surrounding immigration reform and the current state of trafficked labor in the U.S., nor was I prepared to invest emotionally in the complex men and women who have been victimized by it. I was unwilling to see my own role as a consumer with insatiable appetites for the affordable, or how easy it would be for me to meet the real and tangible emotional and physical needs of my neighbors who live in poverty. I wasn't prepared to be driven toward books that would cause more soul-searching, chasing rabbit trails of documentaries and statistics, hungry to know what the truth was. In short, I wasn't prepared to do the hard work of confronting these stories of suffering that are all around us. All I ever wanted was to be aware. **B&C**

